

VZCZCXR06560
OO RUEHDU RUEHJO RUEHMR
DE RUEHAN #0364/01 1081405
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 181405Z APR 06
FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2598
INFO RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0633
RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY
RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 0030
RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY KAMPALA 0028
RUEHPL/AMEMBASSY PORT LOUIS 0177

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ANTANANARIVO 000364

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SENSITIVE

PARIS FOR D'ELIA
DEPT FOR AF/E
KAMPALA FOR MHSIANG

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM CN

SUBJECT: Comoros Holds Primaries in Anjouan

REF: ANTAN 263

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Awaiting official announcement by the Constitutional Court, the National Electoral Commission of the Union of the Comoros published interim results from the April 16 Presidential primary putting candidates Sambi, Ibrahim Halidi, and Djaanfari through to the second round. Though nicknamed "Ayatollah" because he studied in Iran and Saudi Arabia decades ago, frontrunner Sambi neither claims to be nor appears in his actions to be an Islamic extremist. The South Africans, under the banner of the African Union (AU), did an admirable job keeping the peace as international and national observers were welcomed by enthusiastic Comoran voters. Neither the National nor Island Electoral Commission scored high marks for preparation or management. As long as the Court in Moroni announces the expected winners, Comoros should rather calmly turn to the national campaign for the May 14 election. A more visible AU leadership role, or unexpected wisdom from Azali, will probably be needed if the second round is to go so well. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) The Union of the Comoros has been wracked with instability since it achieved independence from France in 1975. President Azali took power in a coup in 1999 and then was voted into power in elections in 2002. If successful, this election will mark the first peaceful democratic transfer of power since Comoran independence. The three-island nation has also suffered secessionist struggles that led to the current political compromise whereby each island assumes the presidency in turn. President Azali, coming from Grand Comore, must therefore cede to a candidate from Anjouan. The purpose of the April 16 primary on Anjouan was therefore to select the three island candidates who will compete in the national presidential election to be held May 14.

Sambi, Halidi, Djaanfari Projected to Win

¶3. (U) As of midday April 18, populist Ahmed Sambi, former French military officer Mohamed Djaanfari, and President Azali's party candidate Ibrahim Halidi were projected to have placed first, second and third in the Anjouan primaries, passing to the national presidential election May 14. The National Electoral Commission, after two days of silence, announced unofficial results April 18, giving Sambi 26 percent and Djaanfari and Halidi each 14 percent. The High Constitutional Court in Moroni has the legal authority

to declare the official winners and is expected to do so before the 72-hour deadline runs out April 19.

¶14. (SBU) The only significant candidate not to pass the primaries was Mohamed Caabi, current Union Vice President, who reportedly had 10 percent of the vote. Eight other minor candidates, unknowns or has-beens, each earned five percent or less. A handful of Caabi supporters and family caused a disturbance at the hotel housing Union officials and international observers, chanting that "Azali stole the election." The protests were small and were kept under control by South African-led African Union troops. Observers noted that most Comorans associated Caabi with the current ineffectual Azali regime, and across the island whoever voters supported, part of their vote seemed to be against Caabi. Further, rumors were that Anjouan Island President Bacar had it in for Caabi, and reportedly deployed two or three of the other candidates to try to undermine the Union Vice President.

¶15. (SBU) A haggard and nervous Caabi came to the hotel in an attempt to calm and disperse the crowd April 17. He attempted weakly to deliver a letter of protest to AU officials, then left the scene. To guarantee safe passage, the South Africans flew Union government representatives by helicopter from the hotel to the airport for their departure from Anjouan. By April 18, international observers had returned to Moroni and the ballots transferred to the Constitutional Court; thus Anjouan was mostly quiet awaiting official results.

"We delivered the election"

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¶16. (SBU) South African Ambassador Mabeta, admitting a few irregularities, proudly said April 17, "we delivered the election." South African-led AU troops (AMISEC), with a few Mauritian, Malagasy, and Egyptian forces, were professional and effective in providing a presence of deterrence. While not present at most polling stations, the AMISEC handled crowd control at a few big voting sites, conducted roving patrols, and stood ready to respond if needed. Above all, the AMISEC presence, requested by the Union Government and welcomed by the Comorans, made it possible for all Anjouan gendarmerie and security forces to stay in their barracks. There was no sign of domestic Anjouan or Union Comoran uniforms during the primaries April 16.

International and National Observers

¶17. (U) Several independent Comoran observers were joined by 20 international observers led by La Francophonie (OIF) and including the Arab League, African Union, French and U.S. Embassies. In addition, each candidate was eligible to have his own delegate at each voting site - only six or seven had the support to actually assign someone to most locations. Embassy Antananarivo PolEcon Chief and Embassy Port Louis PolOff separately visited a total of over 80 polling stations, about two-thirds of the 220 sites in Anjouan's five regions. Turnout appeared to be high, though an official count will be needed to confirm what percentage of 112,000 registered voters cast a ballot for one of the 12 candidates. Voting lines were full of Comoran women waiting to cast their vote, many in rural areas descending on the polls in the afternoons after tending to their work in the fields all morning. Observers did not report signs of intimidation or interference.

National and Island Electoral Commission Incompetence

¶18. (SBU) Relatively peaceful and seemingly fair primaries occurred in spite of incompetence and lack of accountability

at both the National (CNEC) and Island (CIEC) Electoral Commissions; who were jointly responsible for organization. Voting materials were delivered late to almost every polling station, resulting in hours of delay across the island. Worse, the evening of April 15, the CIEC, with the approval of the CNEC, accepted a last-minute claim by several candidates to change dozens of voting bureau presidents. Responding to the allegation that many were biased, the CIEC set about finding replacements well into the night, then trying to communicate the changes across the vast void of the mountainous isle. As a result many polling stations failed to open before 2 p.m. April 16, especially in the southern Nioumakele region.

¶9. (SBU) The Electoral Commissions almost had an opportunity to compound their error when Azali's candidate, Halidi, asked for the election to be canceled late April 16. His argument was that the irregularity of changing the polling station presidents (which he had endorsed the day before!) had disadvantaged his supporters in the Nioumakele region. Halidi dropped his complaint April 17 when results came in, including from Nioumakele stations that remained open past midnight, indicating he had made the top three. Uncertainty prevailed from the day of the poll through midday April 18, when the CNEC finally made an interim announcement.

Least Worst Case Scenario

¶10. (SBU) While imperfect, the Anjouan presidential primary could scarcely have gone better from the perspective of hope for democracy in Comoros. Sambi, a successful businessman, devout Muslim, and inspiring populist speaker, was clearly the candidate for change and the candidate of the poor. His slogan of "Pour servir, pas se servir" (To serve, not serve oneself) resonated with frustrated Comorans, as did his campaign promise to put a roof over every head. Sambi is the one candidate who would have had genuine street protests on his behalf if he had lost. (Note: Though nicknamed "Ayatollah" because he studied in Iran and Saudi Arabia decades ago, Sambi neither claims to be nor appears in his actions to be an Islamic extremist. For his running-mate he

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named Idi Nadhoim, an economist who spent five years with the United Nations in Addis Ababa, a successful businessman, and well-known secularist moderate. Both Sambi and Idi speak perfect English and have stated publicly and privately their wish to work closely with the United States if elected. End Note.)

¶11. (SBU) Halidi, while President Azali's party's candidate, was less associated with the current government than Caabi, and thus avoided the "referendum" vote against him. Caabi's failed attempt the morning of April 17 to call people to the streets using the Mosque bells appeared to confirm he lacked popular support. Halidi benefited from Azali's war chest and a limited personal following. Djaanfari was universally described as a relative unknown; his French military background will not help in the next round in a country that has already experienced "French influence."

¶12. (SBU) The disturbances caused by Caabi "supporters" were minor and contained by the South African troops -- although they could have been defused if an Election Commission or AU official had the nerve to make a public statement of some kind. Still, overall, the military and civilian international presence was welcomed as positive by the vast majority of Comorans.

¶13. (SBU) COMMENT: Beyond "getting it over with," the Anjouan primary offers several lessons for the second round. The National Electoral Commission cannot be counted on in a crisis, thus Azali himself or international observers will

have to calm tensions when they arise. The South Africans proved themselves capable of providing security, and even helped the hapless Electoral Commissions with logistics. South African Ambassador Mabeta seemed eager keep a low profile and have his country's troops be seen but not needed. For South Africa, the AMISEC mission is all downside: if it goes well it was supposed to, if it fails it was all their fault.

¶14. (SBU) Apart from the South Africans, the AU played a technical role, but offered no real leadership. When tensions flared at the hotel and Caabi supporters asked to see an "international observer," AU observers hid in their rooms while journalists took pictures. Simply accepting a written request to examine irregularities from Caabi may have had a calming effect, instead AMISEC had to order the crowds back across the parking lot. On May 14, it will be necessary for AU Special Representative Madeira, or some other authority, to step to the podium with information and a voice of reason. END COMMENT.

¶15. (U) Embassy Antananarivo would like to express appreciation to Embassy Port Louis for their assistance and cooperation in this election monitoring effort.

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